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Multi-ethnic society and cross-cultural perspectives in the school

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Abstract

This research has the objective to focus the attention on a specific dimension of the scholastic experience of foreign and autochthonous students that is to say that of the school as a place where to create cross-cultural relations. The choice to focus on this area answers the requirements to examine an aspect of the scholastic experience of foreign and Italian students still not much investigated, but that today is quite meaningful. Indeed, is characterized in an increasing way by a plural experience – in the classrooms there are a multiplicity of languages, cultural backgrounds and differentiated levels – and is at the centre of the issue of the quality of the future living together in the multi-ethnic society, as a key institution for the promotion of social cohesion, as well as the acquisition of the necessary competences for the economic and political integration of the citizens of tomorrow (Ambrosini, 2008; Cesareo, 2008). The perspective of cross-cultural teaching is seen as central within the European orientations and the Italian regulations, because the migrations can represent a precious resource on a cultural and educational level only if they are integrated in a continuous process of cross-cultural exchange (Bauman, 1998; 2000; MPI, 2007; Council of Europe, 2008; Commission of the European Communities, 2008; Nesse network, 2008; Giovannini, 2008).

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1. Multi-ethnic society and social living together

Western societies are undergoing deep change, related to the strong mobility of people and groups (Bauman, 1998) and to the extreme closeness of different cultures (Besozzi, 2001). The characterizing trait of such societies is their cross-cultural and multi-ethnic dimension, nevertheless the global culture/local culture relation and the bonds between globalization and ethnicity of the conflicts among cultures (Featherstone, 1996; 1998; Cesareo, 1997; 2000; 2001; Geertz, 1999; Kristeva, 1991; Besozzi, 1999; Bauman, 1998; 2000).

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The multi-ethnic dimension of global society as well as single local realities opens a series of problems around some crucial questions on interethnic living together and integration. The contemporary literature is wondering how to face the challenge imposed by the western societies that have different requests, from recognizing differences and building a social belonging and integration (Besozzi, 2001).

In the sociological scientific debate on the modes of answering the problem of inter-ethnic living together many theories are seen: assimilation theory (Park and Burgess, 1924); multiculturalism theories; neo-assimilation theory (Alba and Nee, 1997; Brubaker, 2001); segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; 2005).

Among the new theories a cross-culturalism has gained importance too, as the perspective that tries to overcome the limits of assimilationism and differentiation keeping at the same time the values, and suggesting the recognition of differences within a common horizon (Cesareo, 2004; 2008; Fondazione Ismu, 2008; 2009). In the ambit of a cross-cultural model, integration can be defined as «a multidimensional process finalized at the pacific living together within a determined social reality between people and groups culturally and ethnically different, based on the respect of diversities with the condition that these don't harm fundamental human rights and the democratic institutions» (Cesareo, 2004: 34).

Cross-culturalism represents also the direction towards which Europe is moving, that proclaimed 2008 “European year for cross-cultural dialogue” (Decision n. 1983/2006/EC), with the intent to promote a deep dialogue between cultures and a respectful European citizenship of cultural differences and based on European common values (Commission of the European Communities, 2008; Council of Europe, 2008).

2. Cross-cultural education

School is at the core of the question of the quality of future living together in a multi-ethnic society, as key institution for the acquisition of cross-cultural competences, that can favor social cohesion, and of necessary competences for economic and political integration of the citizens of the future (Giovannini and Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Ambrosini, 2008).

The perspective of cross-cultural education is central within European orientations (European Community Commission, 2008; Nesse Network, 2008) and the Italian regulations (MPI, 2007; CM 73/1994). School is a privileged place where to promote cross-cultural competences, as the ability to learn and respect cultural diversities and the «research of social cohesion, in a new vision of citizenship suitable for current pluralism in which most attention is focused on building a convergence towards common values» (Giovannini, 2008: 142-143; MPI, 2007: 9).

In the ambit of Italian regulations it is underlined that «to adopt a cross-cultural perspective, or the promotion of dialogue and of confrontation among the cultures, means to not stop only at organizing strategies of integration for the immigrant students [...]. To teach in a cross-cultural perspective means rather to take on the diversity as paradigm of the school's identity in pluralism» (MPI, 2007: 3-4). Relatively to the actions for a cross-cultural integration, in the Ministerial Document *La via italiana* (MPI, 2007) it is highlighted how cross-cultural education should develop on two complementary dimensions: cognitive and relational.

The relational dimension is set on an affective and relational level and it can be activated through contact, cooperation and sharing of experience.

The cognitive dimension is finalized at opening the cognitive field and at opening the ability of decentralization to show the variety of standpoints, promoting exchange, and to develop critical thoughts. «The relativation of criteria and concepts, indispensable base of a critic thought, does not lead to a radical relativism, but to a research of shared criteria of reality and promoting attitudes of openness and sensitivity towards diversity» (MPI, 2007: 17).

Cross-cultural education in the school is conceived both as transverse and interdisciplinary as a specific curricular space that takes on the form of a new «education of citizenship that includes cross-cultural dimension and has as objectives the openness, equality and social cohesion» (MPI, 2008: 17-18). The idea of citizenship starts to be seen with the objective to conjugate universal values and individual rights.

In this sense scholastic subjects- history, geography, literature, mathematics and other- are an occasion to form diversity. In the Ministerial Document CM 73/1994, *Dialogo interculturale e convivenza democratica: l'impegno progettuale della scuola* (Parte II, 5 *Discipline e intercultura*) it is underlined that «the teaching of History has to recognize the contributions and the autonomous values of different cultures and free itself of rigid foundations with an ethnocentric and Eurocentric character, for an objective analysis of meeting and clash moments among the people

and civilizations. At the same time history can open itself up to the problems of a pacific living together among the people and face the theme of racism, in its manifestations and premises and the theme of migrations, as a continuous historical event». Teaching Italian can allow, according to the different scholastic levels, «a cross-cultural consideration of the events of the language (Latin origin, exchanges with other modern languages, relation with the dialects), an approach [...] to other cultures, European and extra-European, and a reflection on their relations». At the same time, artistic education and the music one allow an approach to other cultures and their relations. On the same level, the learning of foreign languages, «other than offering instruments of communication and to promote the availability to other linguistic learning, it allows to get near the different ways of organizing thoughts in every language». Geography presents a strong cross-cultural value «for the progressive opening from near too far, and therefore, from the local reality to a national one, from the European context to a world one».

Mathematical-scientific subjects «give a founding contribution to a cross-cultural education, because they promote the ability of coherent and argumentative reasoning, appreciation of confronting ideas, critical attitude. Reference to the contribution, personal or group, of scholars from different nations to the scientific progress can show the debt of every country in outside contributions». The hours dedicated expressly to civic education «can allow to learn the principles of the Constitution, in harmony with the universal Declaration of the rights of man and the presentation of communitarian and International institutions». (CM 73/1994).

Besides, in a European and Italian context it is underlined how the acquisition of the language of destination is «an indispensable element to integrate in the welcoming society, to take part in its economic, social, intellectual, artistic and politic life» (European Commission, 2008; MPI, 2007). The conservation of the language of origin and the linguistic diversity, at the same level of the cultural and religious one can be a precious resource for the educative experience; it can contribute to cross-cultural dialogue and favor European integration (Nesse network, 2008).

Therefore, to form in a cross-cultural sense means to recognize the other in its diversity, without creating “ethnic/cultural cages” and creating communication channels (MPI, 2007).

Cross-cultural education, in the ambit of a frame of meeting between people with different cultures, rejects racism, anti-Semitism, Islam phobia and hate against Rom communities.

3. Cross-cultural perspectives in the school :the results of an empiric research

The dimension of the school as a place where to build cross-cultural competences has been analyzed in the ambit of an empiric research carried out – through the administration of a questionnaire- among Italian and immigrant students (1314 students, of which 881 Italians, 317 foreigners and 116 children of mixed couples), attending the second and third year of first degree secondary school in Abruzzo (Italy).

Different aspects of the scholastic experience of Italian and non Italian students have been analyzed, that can be re-conducted to the knowledge of the welcoming country’s language, to maintaining the language of origin, cross-cultural relations, the classroom as a place of communication and cooperation, the plurality of belonging, to values that are considered important in life.

For the research’s purpose the following variables have been taken into consideration²: citizenship, genre belonging, characteristics of the family, age of immigration, area of provenience.

The analysis of the data has allowed to focus on an articulate picture.

3.1. Linguistic literacy teaching and optimizing multilingualism

As concerns the competences of the language of the country of destination, from the data it is possible to notice that the foreigners have more difficulties in the written phase and that the linguistic difficulties in general, and

² Refer to Hakuta, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Tribalat, 1995; Dubet and Martuccelli 1996; Zhou, 1997; Perlman and Waldinger, 1997; Besozzi, 1999; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; 2005; Portes and Hao, 2002; Giovannini and Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Barbagli, 2006.

specifically, those concerning the written elaboration increase sensibly with the decrease of time spent in the country of destination: 38% of the foreign students that arrived in Italy from the age of six and 72% of students born in Italy or that arrived before the age of six stated that they could write “well or very well” a text in Italian.

Concerning the preserving of the language of origin, the data collected suggest that a strong percentage of foreign students speaks in family the language of origin and a significant amount of foreign preadolescents have a good competence in the mother-tongue. Almost three quarters of the foreigners has a good level of comprehension and oral expression of the mother tongue, an inferior amount, but significant at the same time- just more than half-shows good levels of written expression and comprehension too. However the linguistic abilities decrease sensibly with the time of permanence in the destination country: even if it continues to be a good level of oral comprehension and expression for half of the foreigners born in Italy or that arrived during the first years of their lives, the share decreases noticeably that can read and write very well in the language of origin of their parents.

In the awareness that communicating, and particularly, studying “Italian as second language” is a complex process, in recent years schools have activated Ital2 laboratories in order to offer to newly arrived students the opportunity to make up for the linguistic deficiency. However, in the Italian scholastic institutions the certificates ItalBase and ItalStudio are still quite unknown, these register the levels of competence in the language according to common standards to all the European languages. Such certificates can be efficient in order to exploit acquired linguistic competences of the students, but also to give teachers a common reference frame and to structure a specific formation of teachers for the teaching of Ital2 in order to obtain certificates (MPI, 2007; Santagati, 2009).

Besides, promoting actions to exploit multilingualism can be efficient. The words in the Ministerial Document *La via italiana* are clear on such topic: «the maintenance of the language of origin is a human right and a fundamental instrument for a cognitive growth, with positive turnouts also on Ital2 and on foreign languages studied at school», and for the paths of building the identity and stabilizing personality (MPI, 2007: 13-14). In the European context «a wise management [...] of linguistic diversity can [...] favor a European integration, promote the spirit of belonging to the Union; it can also contribute to the dialogue among cultures and their harmonic coexistence, towards the rest of the world, and in our society» is outlined (European Commission, 2008: 29; Nesse network, 2008).

Despite the indications of the Italian regulations, the purposes of European political linguistics and the acquisition of studies on multilingualism (Hakuta, 1986; Portes and Hao, 2002; Gaudet and Clément, 2005), therefore the educational and didactic procedures continues to be mono-cultural and exploitation of multilingualism and the maintenance of the mother tongue are still an objective to achieve.

3.2. Cross-cultural relations

The aspect of the school as a place where to build cross-cultural relations has been investigated considering the opinion of preadolescents on: the teaching of the Italian Constitution to all students, that is to say the fundamental principles that are at the basis of the social living together; the teaching in the Italian school of Italian and European history and culture or the history and culture of all the populations; the teaching of religion and on the exposition of religious symbols in the public school (MPI, 2007; CM 73/1994; Mentasti and Ottaviano, 2008; Besozzi, 2008).

The answers show how the Italian (88%), foreigner (85%) and with one non-Italian parent (87%) students agree on the fact that in the Italian school it is correct to let all students study The Italian constitution (Figure 1). At the same time, among the students interviewed the idea of the school as a place where to learn culture and history of European and extra-European populations has emerged, damaging a marked Eurocentric proposal.

As regarding the theme of the teaching of religion and the exposition of religious symbols in public schools, 48% of the students interviewed think that in the Italian school only Catholic religion should be taught and 40% thinks that school can offer an opportunity to widen the minds of students in a multi-religious key. The Italians are the ones orientated towards the teaching of the only Catholic religion (52%), while among the foreigners higher shares of those that think all religions should be taught (48%) are registered (Figure 2).

As concerns the question of the exposition of religious symbols, more than half of the interviewed students thinks that in the Italian schools only catholic religious symbols should be exposed, almost a quarter think that all religious symbols should be exposed and a little less than a fifth think that no religious symbol should be exposed. Considering the opinions of the three subgroups, in the case of exposition of religious symbols there are more differences than those found for religious teaching: the Italians are inclined for the exposition of only Catholic symbols (60%), while the opinions of non Italian preadolescents choose all three the options, with a higher

orientation for the exposition of all the religious symbols (39%) and, to follow, only catholic symbols (34%) and no religious symbol (28%) (Figure 3).

If the data relating to the foreigners from area of provenience is broken up, it is noticeable how nationality influences in a clear way the opinion of the preadolescents.

Striking is the position of the Asians which, higher in percentage compared to other subgroups (46% compared to 31,4% of Africans and 22,4% of Eastern Europeans), consider that no religious symbol should be exposed in the Italian school. Preadolescents from African countries favor more than other nationalities the teaching of all religions (64%).

Different orientations among students of different nationalities are explained with the importance that religion and religious references have in the country of origin: the preadolescents of African origin mainly come from countries where religious references have a central position, while those who come from Asia, above all China, a country where the state has not promoted the diffusion of religions (Dalla Zuanna et al., 2009).

Considering this, the question of cross-religious dialogue as an educational resource for a cross-cultural school, which intends to exploit common meanings, even diversity ones, and to favour the development of attitudes like respect, recognition and reciprocity in the exploration of the self (MPI, 2007; Mentasti and Ottaviano, 2008; Besozzi, 2008).

The higher the level of education of the parents is, favours a stronger orientation of preadolescents towards a multicultural and cross-religious teaching in the school and towards the idea of the necessity of teaching the Constitution to all students.

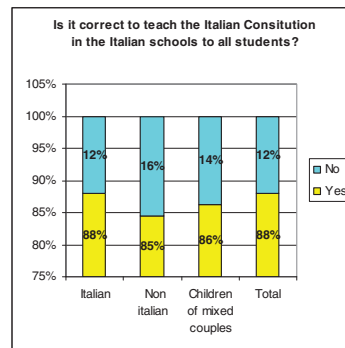


Figure 1. Teaching of the Italian Constitution (Citizenship)

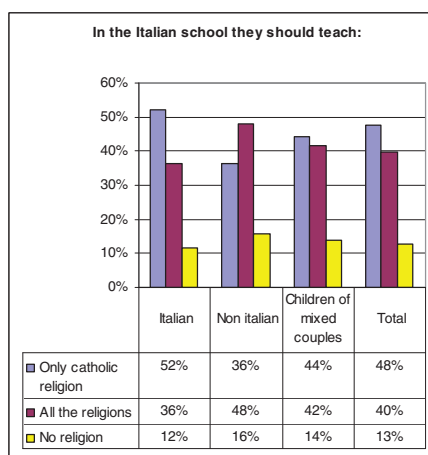


Figure 2. Teaching of religion (Citizenship)

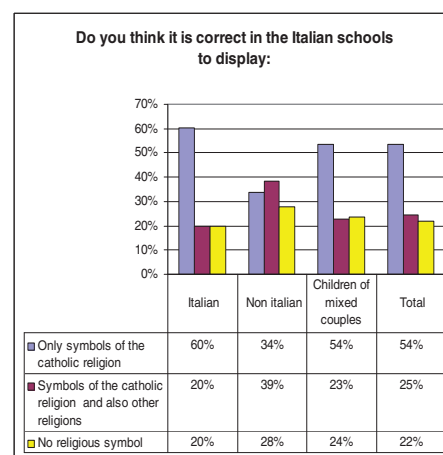


Figure 3. Display of religious symbols (Citizenship)

3.3. Behavior and importance given to values

The relational dimension of cross-cultural education (MPI, 2008) has been investigated through behavior and cross-cultural exchanges in the relationship with peers. From the analysis of the data it is visible that almost half of the students shows independence towards the group and about two thirds of the students never gets into a fight to make their own ideas be heard. Furthermore, a relatively small share of students helps one another in class with homework, while the majority seldom helps one another; besides, the students exchange games with their classmates less than with group of friends outside the scholastic context; in class episodes of marginalization take place with a higher frequency than with groups of friends outside the scholastic context. Less than one adolescent out of four often helps classmates or friends when they are excluded from the group.

Considering the cultural level of the family, it is noticeable that children with parents with medium-high education act with a higher cooperation and exchange of experiences in class. Besides, girls are more orientated, than the boys of the same age, to cross-cultural exchanges in scholastic and extra-scholastic relations.

As concerns the values thought to be important in life, the data found do not disagree from those of the national investigation of the Iard Institute (Buzzi et al., 2006), in the sense that the interviewed preadolescents have a strong attention on social restricted areas- family, friendship and love- and little interest on politics. Nevertheless, a noticeable interest of the students towards universal values is detected: equality- almost three quarters of the interviewed students-, solidarity and freedom. Students are sensitive also to the fulfillment of their dreams, to have fun. Studying is very important to more than half the interviewed.

Differences within the three subgroups are registered, such as friendship, love, equality and freedom are more important for Italians and children of mixed couplet. The children of mixed couples are more sensitive to solidarity than both foreigners and Italians. The foreigners are more careful than the other two groups to success and – above all the Asians- to becoming rich.

The attention of foreigners to love and equality grows as the time they spend in our country grows, reaching percentage values near to the Italian ones.

Even the cultural level of the parents is an influence on the importance given to children to values, above all concerning solidarity, freedom and studying, but also concerning religion and sport.

Considering the differences of genre, from the analysis of the data it is evident that female students are more sensitive to friendship, love and fulfilling their dreams and to “abstract political values” such as equality, solidarity and freedom. The boys are more interested in sport and success than the girls, but also, even if with a minor percentage, to work and richness and other “concrete” aspects.

3.4. Multiple belonging

As for the formation of a sense of National belonging or multi-belonging in preadolescents that daily do experience in a society and in a school characterized increasingly by a multiple living together, the data show an articulate picture.

70% of the interviewed students feel Italian and 66% feel Abruzzese. The Italians that have developed a sense of national belonging are 81%, thus also the share of foreigners (37%) who feel Italian is significant.

To confirm what was shown by the Cils research carried out by Portes on the second generations in the schools in San Diego and Miami, the inclination to a feeling of belonging to the welcoming country increases as the time living in the welcoming country increases: the percentage of foreigners that declared feeling “Italian” goes from 26% of preadolescents arrived in Italy in school age and 56% among the students born in Italy or arrived during the first years of their lives (Figure 4).

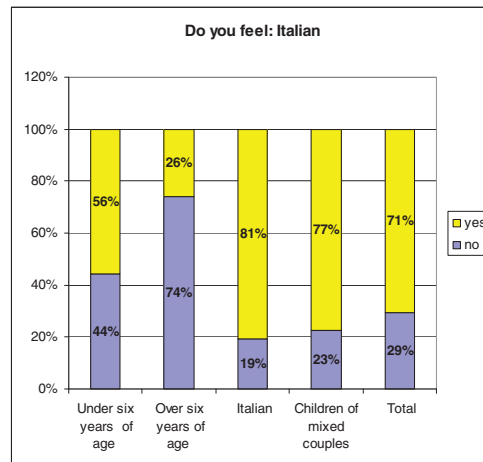


Figure 4. Multiple belonging (by age of immigration)

As for the formation of wider identities than a National one (Ambrosini, 2008; Kymlicka, 1995; European Commission, 2008; Bloemraad, 2009), almost 38% of preadolescents feels a citizen of the world and 39% a European citizen is observed (Figure 5; 6). It is still a contained number that shows an initial process that can be helped in the ambit of cross-cultural teaching.

Citizenship influences the formation of above-national identities: the percentage of foreigners (28%) that declared a cosmopolitan feeling is clearly inferior to the one of the Italians (41%) or of mixed couplet (40%). Besides, only 21% of foreigners stated to feel European. The percentage decreases to 5% among the Chinese and 19% among the Africans, but is small also among the preadolescents coming from European countries (29%).

This datum should be interpreted within the question of European identity that is still forming. Besides, the founding values of Europe are not taught at school. The necessity to show the values that are at the basis of a European citizenship at school is outline (Commission of the European Communities, 2008).

If the influence of the parent's education is considered on the formation of multi-belonging, the majority of children with parents with a degree are more inclined to develop a sense of belonging and ways of belonging wider than the national ones is observed.

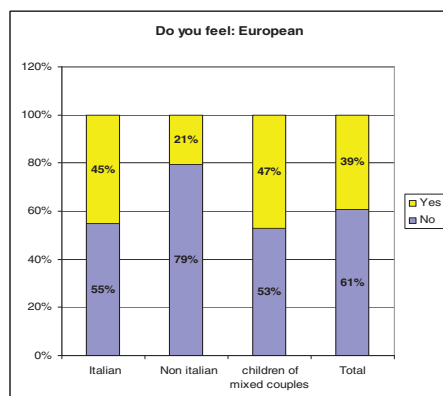


Figure 5. Multiple belonging in Europe (Citizenship)

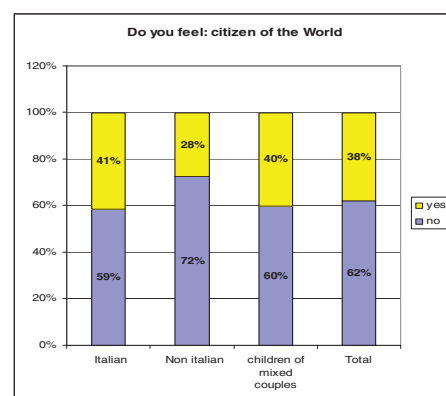


Figure 6. Multiple belonging in the World (Citizenship)

4. Conclusions

From the investigation of the scholastic experience of Italian and foreign students in a mutating school - characterized in a growing measure by a plural living together and by a cross-cultural model - among the preadolescents a cross-cultural relation is outlined, cross-cultural exchange and forms of multiple belonging, furthermore the results of the research show how the journey is still at the beginning.

In such a vision school can have an important role in the development of cross-cultural competences, in the formation of social bonds and flexible and inclusive belonging and in the building of a multiple and shared citizenship, that implies the recognition of individual rights and universal values, to promote the living together in a multiethnic society.

Cross-cultural relations experimented in the scholastic context are a laboratory of acquisition of cross-cultural competences, that can significantly help cohesion in culturally heterogeneous society (Cesareo, 2008; Ambrosini, 2008; Giovannini, 2008).

An important resource is given from the scholastic subjects that can be a formation occasion of cross-cultural competences, of promotion of behaviors of openness, sensitivity and respect towards diversity and, at the same time of building a convergence towards common values.

In particular, as is outlined in the Ministerial Document *La via Italiana* (MPI, 2007), in the field of teaching history it is best to overcome highly marked Eurocentric and identity and to conceptualize the link history-citizenship; geography can be an occasion for the formation of worldwide conscience. In the field of foreign language teaching actions to exploit multilingualism and for the maintenance of the language of origin can be promoted, the general offer of the foreign languages should be thought of again including the languages spoken by the majority of the community according to the area of the country (MPI, 2007; European Commission, 2008).

Multi-religiosity that is seen in many scholastic classes can represent a direct opportunity to understand symbols and can be exploited through the adoption of the use of knowledge and dialogic comparison (Mentasti and Ottaviano, 2008; Besozzi, 2008).

The civic education classes allow to learn about the principles of the Constitution and Communitarian and international institutions. With the objective of promoting an active and open to the world European citizenship and based on common values and on the respect of cultural diversities in Europe, the European Commission declared 2008 “European year of cross-cultural dialogue” (Commission of the European Communities, 2008; Bloemraad, 2009).

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